



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Kon Satoshi and Japan's monsters in the city

Citation for published version:

Perkins, C 2019, 'Kon Satoshi and Japan's monsters in the city', *Nordlit*, vol. 42, no. Spring/Summer, pp. 141–152. <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5009>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.7557/13.5009](https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5009)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Nordlit

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



KON SATOSHI AND JAPAN'S MONSTERS IN THE CITY

Chris Perkins (University of Edinburgh)

Abstract: *This article offers an analysis of Kon Satoshi's use of monsters in his 2004 animated television series Paranoia Agent (Mōsō Dairinin). Focussing on the bat-wielding figure of Shōnen Batto and a cuddly pink doll called Maromi, it is shown how Kon Satoshi uses these figures to critique a range of fatalistic discourses on Japan's decline that have emerged since the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in the early 1990s. I argue Kon repackages the 'vague sense of anxiety' prevalent in post-bubble Japan as monster in order to access the psychic realities of Japan, and as a tool for developing a critique of Japan's fear of and fascination with social monsters. Through analysis of key scenes, the article shows how Kon develops a rich dialectical understanding of Japan's on-going search for monsters, while also forwarding his own humanist view of social responsibility as method of navigating the ever-changing social environment of late-modern Japan.*

Keywords: *Kon Satoshi; anime; monsters; spectacle; media; Japan; lost decades.*

Introduction

This article¹ offers an analysis of Kon Satoshi's use of monsters in his 2004 animated television series *Paranoia Agent* (*Mōsō Dairinin*; Kon 2010 [2004]).² However, the two monsters in question do not immediately strike the viewer as particularly monstrous. One is a teenage boy wearing inline skates and holding a crooked baseball bat known as Shōnen Batto (see figure 1b), the other is a cuddly pink doll called Maromi (see figure 1a). At first glance these two characters have little to do with each other. However, as will be shown, Kon Satoshi uses these figures to critique fatalistic discourses of the nation since the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in the early 1990s, and the clamour to escape from the anxieties of the post-bubble age. After providing some background on Japan's postwar monsters in the city, I draw upon the work of Smits (2006) to conceptualise cultural monsters as the product of mismatches between extant categories of understanding and emerging social phenomena. I then move on to analyse Kon's monsters in *Paranoia Agent* in the context of this framework, arguing that Kon repackages what David Leheny (2006) has termed the 'vague sense of anxiety' prevalent in post-bubble Japan as monster as both a method of cognition and a tool for developing critique of the anxiety discourse. Through this dual mechanism Kon develops a rich dialectical understanding of Japan's fear of and fascination with monsters, while also forwarding his own humanist view of social responsibility in late-modern Japan.

¹ All translations are my own unless stated otherwise. Japanese names are provided in surname, forename format.

² This is the official rendering for the English language release of the television series. *Paranoia Agent* was released in North America and Europe between 2004 and 2005 by Geneon, and the series was also broadcast on the cable channel Adult Swim in 2006.



Figures 1a–1b. Maromi and Shōnen Batto. Copyright: MVM Entertainment.

Japan's Monsters in the City

Japan has a well-known history of monsters in the city, and although the use of monsters for social critique stretches back to at least the Meiji Period (Figal 1999), it is Japan's post-war monsters that immediately spring to mind. These monsters have also tended to be rather destructive. Godzilla, perhaps Japan's most famous postwar monster, is a prime example. In his own inimitable city-trampling style, Godzilla was a direct response to Japanese anxieties regarding Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the developing Cold War order, as well as a visual manifestation of anger at America's Bikini Atoll nuclear tests in 1954. This test of a hydrogen bomb codenamed Bravo in the Marshall Islands showered 23 crewmen of the Japanese fishing boat Lucky Dragon with radioactive ash, resulting in one death and many hospitalisations (Dusinberre/Aldrich 2011: 5; Shun'ya/Loh 2012: 319–331). However, as Napier (1993: 332) argues, rather than a simple critique of the growing Cold War pact developing between the Japanese and Americans, Godzilla played a number of roles, tapping into nuclear anxieties but also, by having Japanese science defeat the evil monster, offering “its immediate postwar Japanese audience an experience that was both cathartic and compensatory”.

Fast forward thirty years and Napier draws attention to another monster, this time in the form of the demonised teenager. Now it is the biker (*bōsōzoku*), Tetsuo, in Otomo Katsuhiro's 1988 animated film *Akira*, whose body becomes a site of Japanese anxieties regarding its youth, the relentless integration of technology into society (see Morris-Suzuki 1988) and the ever-present nuclear blast, which haunts the narrative and acts as a metonym for Japan's long postwar (Harootunian 2006). Like Godzilla, Tetsuo unleashes destruction on (neo) Tokyo; but unlike Godzilla, science cannot come to the rescue—indeed it is science itself that produces a monster outside the human capacity to understand, prescient of the ‘beyond all expectations’ (*sōteigai*), discourse maintained

by Tepco in the wake of the Fukushima Dai-ichi meltdown.³ And like that ongoing disaster there is no catharsis, only the potential for reinventing the nation inherent in destruction (Dudden 2012).

In 1988, as the cells in Tetsuo's body multiplied out of control on Japan's cinema screens, the Japanese economy appeared to follow suit. From the 1960s Japan experienced unprecedented economic growth under the Ikeda plan and apparently sage stewardship by the technocratic elite; in the 1970s Japan seemed to weather the economic turmoil brought about by OPEC induced oil shocks better than the established Western powers; and in the 1980s Japan looked set to dislodge the US from its number one slot, at least in economic terms. However, in contrast to the delirious bubble years of the mid to late 1980s, when the Nikkei index shot up into the stratosphere and, like Tetsuo's mutated form, a speculative property bubble grew out of all proportion, the 1990s and 2000s were marked by profound unease. After the 1989 stock market crash, commentators, politicians, and the media began discussing the end of a particular idea of Japan. Out of the institutional wreckage left by the bubble crept monsters which started to gnaw away at the accepted truths of Japanese society—that it was harmonious, peaceful, hardworking and equal. As Leheny (2006) has argued, in the 1990s and 2000s (known in Japan as the two 'lost' decades) Japan learned to 'think global' but 'fear local'. However, what were people scared of? Two monsters spring to mind, although I use the term loosely as they were not the monsters of Japanese folk tradition, but people rendered monstrous in the context of a Japan seemingly in national crisis.

The first was the bloated figure of Asahara Shoko, the leader of Aum Shinrikyō.⁴ In 1995, fearing a police raid on their base of operations Aum took plastic bags wrapped with newspaper and packed with the neural toxin sarin onto the Tokyo underground, which spreads underneath the city like a vascular system. They then stabbed the bags with the sharpened tips of umbrellas, letting the poison leak into the city's blood stream, killing 13 and affecting a thousand more. What made this act even more monstrous was the fact that Aum counted many members of the educated elite within its ranks: members of the class which was supposed to lead the nation into the future seemed to be intent on bringing that future to an end. There was also something otherworldly in its subterranean menace; as the novelist Murakami Haruki (Murakami 2000: 237) put it the Aum incident was a "nightmarish eruption from beneath our feet—from underground—that threw all the latent contradictions and weak points of our society into frighteningly high relief". It was also an event that unleashed monsters which appeared in his earlier novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*: "the five Aum 'agents' who punctured those bags of sarin with the sharpened tips of their umbrellas unleashed swarms of INKlings beneath the streets of Tokyo" (Murakami 2000: 241).⁵

³ After March 11, 2011, *Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings* (TEPCO), the Japanese electricity company that built the Fukushima nuclear plant, argued that the earthquake and tsunami could not be predicted and therefore could not be prevented. See Pulvers (2012).

⁴ Aum Shinrikyō, known as Aleph, was a Japanese new religion lead by Asahara Shoko. The group was responsible for a number of murders, in the 1990s culminating in the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system. For more see Reader (2000).

⁵ Murakami's INKlings feature in his novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (Murakami 2003) in which they are described as dangerous sewer-dwelling monsters.

The second monster was the juvenile murderer Shōnen A. In 1997 Shōnen, or Youth A, committed a series of attacks against elementary school children in Kōbe, a city that was only beginning to recover from its own subterranean nightmare in the form of the great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. His attacks culminated in him murdering one child and placing the head on his school gate. A note accompanied the head, in which Shōnen A taunted the police and swore revenge on the school system that he said had ‘robbed him of his existence’. Like the Aum incident, this child-come-monster came to represent national anxieties in the wake of the bubble economy. According to Andrea Arai (2000: 848), attempts to delve into the inner recesses of his mind “echoed back on the problems of its nurture, and from here to that which is naturally supposed to emerge as the end result of this process of development, the adult subject, and from there to a national subjectivity”. However, the search for explanations at the national level only served to heighten the social anxieties produced by the event. Shōnen A was rendered monstrous by the fact that he seemed to be unknowable: He had stepped out of society’s life course schematic, out of the institutions and value-laden categories used to make sense of children’s actions.⁶

What draws these monsters together? As Arai has already pointed out, there is something here about unknowability. But this explanation only begs the question: What does it mean to *know* something and what does this have to do with monsters?

The ‘monster theory’ of Martijntje Smits (2006) is helpful for answering these questions. In explaining the cultural use of monster metaphors in the context of scientific and technological developments, Smits argues that technology becomes monstrous when it problematises the basic categories underpinning a society’s symbolic order. Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]), Smits suggests that monsters emerge from the gaps between the cultural categories that form the precondition for our perception of the world, and new phenomena that do not fit neatly into those categories (2006: 494). Unknowability, thus, comes from a failure of fit between categories of knowing, which establish a society’s symbolic order, and emergent phenomena, such as technological change, which call that symbolic order into question.

Important for the discussion to follow is Smits’ observation that culturally produced monsters—as an unknowable challenge to the symbolic order—provoke two seemingly contradictory but nevertheless concurrent reactions. The first is fear: the unknowable leads to uncertainty and ambiguity, and a challenge to our security. The second reaction, however, is fascination and reverence. Those phenomena that transcend our categories of knowledge offer salvation, the promise of the new, and the excitement of the untamed. Furthermore, it is perfectly possible for these two dispositions towards the monster to be held at the same time. Just as monsters are the product of categorical breakdown, our dispositions towards the monster also defy simple categorization (Smits 2006: 493–495).

Indeed, we see this duality of fascination and fear in all the examples of Japanese monsters discussed above. With Godzilla, there is both the terrible destructive power of science, and the potential for limitless energy and technological salvation. The same is also true of Tetsuo’s embodiment of technological development and the rampant market economy. If Aum and Asahara were simple objects of fear, it would be hard to explain

⁶ For details of the ideology of childhood as seen in Japanese schools see Fukuzawa (2007): 61–86.

the media frenzy that followed the Aum incident, and subsequent attempts to engage with Aum as an object of fascination. This is because Aum was an example of category confusion: Educated, intelligent middle-class people who should progress through the standard life course instead renounced the world and eventually tried to bring about its end. The category confusion then produced incessant attempts at explanation as a method of suturing up the symbolic order. Shōnen A's monstrosity also came from broken categories—Japanese school children should be cheerful, buoyant, diligent and rule abiding (Fukuzawa 2007: 71). Shōnen A made children unknowable by disproving the universal applicability of these descriptive categories. To return to Arai (2000: 852): “[c]hildren that commit crimes like adults, who want what adults want, are thus incomprehensible, and this lack in knowledge leads to the production of the monstrous”.

Thus, these monsters, as well as numerous other moral scares in the mid to late 1990s, were both produced by, and went on to fuel, the vague sense of anxiety in Japan brought on by recognition that the grand-national narratives of the second half of the twentieth century could no longer be sustained. Both Aum and Shōnen A committed their brutal attacks at a point when Japan was experiencing shocks that shook the foundations of institutional realities carefully instigated and maintained throughout the postwar period: the family, gender roles, Japan's middle-class society, the school system, banking and the political apparatus all became problematic.

As will be discussed below, Kon's approach to Japan's contemporary cultural monsters recognises the duality of fear and fascination. In *Paranoia Agent*, two apparently distinct monsters, one which strikes terror into the hearts of the Japanese, and another that promises salvation, are shown to be the two faces of the same phenomenon. But more than simply showing us the true face of Japan's new monsters in the city, with *Paranoia Agent* Kon challenges us to move past the duality to look for a certainty grounded in humanist ethics, and by doing so find the stability needed to resist succumbing to the temptations of fear and fascination.

Kon's Monsters in the City

Kon's films were all released in the context of a Japan in the social, economic and political doldrums depicted above: A discursive situation that provides a point of reference for his civic conscience (Napier 2006). It is important to emphasise that this was a discursive situation above and beyond anything else, by most objective measures Japan was, and still is, a safe, hi-tech nation with a well-educated workforce and enviably low unemployment. This is not to downplay the very real human and material devastation of the events described in the preceding pages, but as Leheny (2006: 46) reminds us, “people create their own reality; whether there were real witches in Salem was less important, at least in terms of consequences for the town than people's belief that there were”. This was something Kon was acutely aware of, and we can plausibly read *Paranoia Agent* as a sustained attempt to represent this discursively produced reality as well as the consequences for the ‘Townsppeople’ of Japan. This goal is also hinted at by the Japanese title of the series: although admittedly not as catchy, a more literal translation would be ‘Agent of Delusion’.

Each of the stories deals with a particular national point of concern: youth violence, bullying, child molestation, online suicide groups and issues of gender roles—the

monsters creeping from the cracks in Japan's ailing institutions.⁷ The 13-part television series is linked together by our first monster: a baseball bat wielding teenager known in English translation as 'Lil Slugger' but in the original Japanese as Shōnen Batto. In each episode, a character or group of characters experiencing anxiety or fear are attacked by Shōnen Batto and knocked into peaceful unconsciousness. His first victim is Sagi, a timid toy designer struggling to create a new cartoon character to capitalise on the success of our second monster, Maromi: a cuddly pink teddy bear/dog like character, who was a big financial success for Sagi's company.⁸ After a day of relentless pressure from her boss and bullying from her jealous colleagues, Shōnen Batto suddenly appears and attacks Sagi in a car park. Two police officers, Ikari and Maniwa, are assigned to investigate the incident but they make little progress: the mysterious bat-wielding boy attacks more and more people, all of who seem to be suffering from anxieties.

After a suspect dies in custody, Ikari and Maniwa are struck off. Ikari goes on to work as a security guard on a construction site, while Maniwa becomes obsessed with the case. The attacks continue and the series becomes frantic: Shōnen Batto grows in power, while at the same time anticipation over new animated series featuring Maromi turns into mass hysteria. As Shōnen Batto becomes more powerful, Ikari and Maniwa confront Sagi, who reveals that Maromi is based on a puppy she had as a child. However, Sagi had let go of the puppy's leash and it had run into traffic and died. Scared of what her father would say, Sagi invented Shōnen Batto to account for the puppy's death. At this point in the narrative it becomes clear that Shōnen Batto returned to save the now adult Sagi from the pressures of creating a new character at work. Shōnen Batto's 'attack' gave Sagi the excuse she needed to avoid the pressure placed upon her by her boss and colleagues. However, once the concept of Shōnen Batto got out via the mass media other people began to draw on him as an escape route from the pressures they were experiencing. When Sagi admits the truth in the final scenes of the series Shōnen Batto is defeated.

As Gerald Figal (2012) has also argued, Maromi and Shōnen Batto illustrate how Japanese society has created methods to simplify and sanitise human emotional reactions to events, and thus avoid dealing with those events head on. Furthermore, by linking the two together, Kon argues that they share the same cause. As with Leheny's observation about the Salem witch trials above, Shōnen Batto is a discursively produced monster: Or more accurately he is the teenager rendered monstrous. However, consistent with the duality of fear and salvation discussed above, this production of the monstrous is, for Kon, an escape mechanism. Sagi invents him in order to escape from the reality of her pressured life, but once Shōnen Batto is let loose into the world, subject to media debate, gossip and speculation, he becomes a resource for others and takes on a life of his own. In this sense Kon's monstrous teenager further illustrates the flimsy divide between private and public demonstrated by Arai's discussion of Shōnen A, whereby an isolated incident concerning particular victims and their families quickly evolved into a national level crisis pointing to a breakdown in the structure of Japan itself. In much the same way, Shōnen Batto acts as a conduit to facilitate the transference of individual anxiety to the nation, lifting responsibility for dealing with

⁷ The following plot summary is based on the one found in Perkins (2012: 126).

⁸ The name 'Maromi' does not have a direct translation into English, but the name implies something round and soft.

the causes of such anxiety from the shoulders of the characters and placing with the nebulous realm of the national. The point of attack is the point of transference, with unconsciousness akin to the delegation of thought to the nation itself. Shōnen Batto's monstrous reality is thus enacted and maintained through performance, with his ontological status the product of cumulative constitutive speech acts that have become routinised through everyday usage and propagated through media spectacle.⁹ As Debord argued, the media as spectacle goes beyond simple representation to become "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" and in this meditational capacity, the spectacle of images has tangible social effects: "[...] when the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real things—dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for hypnotic behaviour" (Debord 2009: 24–25). Therefore, it does not matter that Shōnen Batto is a figment of Sagi's childish imagination or that he has no physical reality per se. It is enough that he has a psychic reality and as such can, and does, motivate 'hypnotic' behaviour.

Shōnen Batto has a mutually constitutive relationship with our second monster, Maromi, who is also a product of the spectacle, also able to provide the motivations for hypnotic behaviour. If the baseball bat-wielding monster offers escape through unconsciousness, Maromi offers the same solace through another mechanism: The soft reassurance of consumption and play. Thus, while some have drawn attention to the cathartic and communal aspects of consumption in Japanese society (Stevens 2010), Kon draws equivalence between Shōnen Batto's physical violence and what he sees as a problematic relationship between the Japanese and their media industries.

In this, as I have argued elsewhere (Perkins 2012: 130), Kon's message appears similar to that of Japanese postmodern theorist Asada Akira (1989), who has argued for a critical appraisal of Japan as postmodern playground. According to his analysis, after the social and political turmoil of the 1960s, Japanese society embarked on a process of infantilisation; the development of a 'playful utopia' typified by a society carried away by wordplay, parody and "other childlike games of differentiation" (Asada 1989: 275). However, this utopia is "at the same time a terrible 'dystopia'", stemming from the underlying ideology of Japanese-ness that acts as the 'protection' to enable the "children to 'play freely'" (Asada 1989: 276). Infantilisation seems to be a component of Kon's diagnosis of Japan's search for monsters as well. Shōnen Batto is a monster produced by a child trying to avoid responsibility for her actions (Sagi), a monster that grows in strength (and efficacy) when used by others who are also trying to avoid engagement with themselves and others. Like Shōnen Batto, Maromi is a product of a mutually constitutive relationship between the media and the consumers who use media products as a means of escape.

The relationship between anxiety, production of the monstrous and escape is elaborated in episode 11 of the series. This episode begins with a sickly woman explaining to a doctor that she cannot afford an operation that might save her life. As she walks through the waiting room we see Sagi on a morning television show discussing the upcoming Maromi animated series. Asked how she feels about Maromi's success, Sagi replies:

⁹ I draw on the discussion of 'performativity' in Butler (1988).

Maromi has been *brought up* by everybody's love. How can I put this, I hope that from this point on her circle of peace will continue through this animated series (Kon 2010 [2004]: 0:02:00–0:02:11 [*Paranoia Agent*, episode 11]; my emphasis).

As Sagi hopes for peace through Maromi's soporific calming presence, the next scenes show Shōnen Batto mania at an all-time high. A succession of people speculate on his appearance: a transformation from teenager to rock monster, to muscle bound freak to hideously scarred demon. One gossiping middle-aged woman finishes the sequence by exclaiming, "He's not a human being but a monster, a monster!" (Kon 2010 [2004]: 0:02:51–0:02:53 [*Paranoia Agent*, episode 11]) and we are presented with a tusked boar holding the signature crooked baseball bat. These scenes are juxtaposed with shots of the frail-looking woman walking through the streets. When she returns home a panting, Shōnen Batto—seemingly eager to send her into unconsciousness—greeted her. The woman then starts to speak to the monster:

I know you. Why are you here? I also called you, didn't I? Yes, I did think about it, that I wanted to die. That I didn't want to continue living by having that surgery [at this point Shōnen Batto takes one step forward in preparation to strike]. But I was wrong. Wrong to think, even for a moment, that I want to die. If I did, that would mean I had betrayed him, my husband (Kon 2010 [2004]: 0:03:10–0:03:47 [*Paranoia Agent*, episode 11]).

The woman's husband is Ikari Keiichi, the police officer charged with solving the Shōnen Batto cases, and who is struck off the force after a suspect dies in custody. Ikari's wife tells Shōnen Batto of her illness, her self-loathing and feelings of guilt, but how her husband had urged her to 'accept reality' (*genjitsu wo ukeireyō*). Shōnen Batto becomes more and more aggravated as he hears this story: when Ikari's wife appears to doubt her husband, he grows into a muscle-bound monster, only to swing ineffectually when it becomes clear that Ikari's wife takes responsibility herself. As the episode progresses Shōnen Batto becomes more and more frustrated by Ikari's wife. At its climax, it is the wife that takes on a monstrous appearance. Her head appears blurred and distorted on a black background as she tells Shōnen Batto that human beings have the power to stand up to reality. Shōnen Batto then throws a television onto the tatami mat floor, at which point Maromi's pink face appears on the screen. Although originally Ikari's wife's lecture was directed at Shōnen Batto, it is now reframed by shots of Maromi's new series, of families entranced by the screen:

You can't understand for you are not human. You merely hurt people and believe that you have relieved their suffering. How sly of you. Feeling euphoria over things like this is the best you can manage. Your very existence is deception. Yes, you're the same as this Maromi creature that deludes people with ad hoc relief (Kon 2010 [2004]: 0:17:16–0:17:42 [*Paranoia Agent*, episode 11]).

Shōnen Batto and Maromi are our two principle monsters, but perhaps one more lurks beneath the surface: the ideology of Japanese-ness that Asada Akira drew attention to above. The previous scenes were intercut with shots of Ikari himself, but it appears he is not the steadfast man his wife makes him out to be. Indeed, Ikari is not immune to the siren song of delusion. However, his retreat is neither Shōnen Batto, nor Maromi, but instead a nostalgic postwar fairground ride where people play their roles in a predictable way, unlike the ‘real’ world that Ikari has withdrawn from. However, this world is haunted by his wife’s presence and as she lies dying on an operating table he starts destroying the 2D world around him with a baseball bat. Maromi tries to stop him as he does this, pleading that if he continues he will destroy his world and as such his place of belonging. Nevertheless, as Ikari destroys the world around him little Maromi dolls appear, demonstrating Ikari’s nostalgic retreat is of the same origin as that provided by the mass media spectacle of Maromi and the monstrous form of Shōnen Batto (Perkins 2012: 129). They are all methods of escaping the pressures of human interaction, of dealing with the present and for avoiding responsibility for action.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Kon Satoshi’s animated television series *Paranoia Agent* is an investigation into the psychic reality of Japan’s city dwelling denizens that seeks to uncover and problematise the status of Japan’s monsters in the city. In doing so, Kon shows us a process of performative construction of the monstrous as people reach out to monsters in order to alleviate the pressures of the everyday. But, once propelled by the media spectacle, the monsters conjured up in *Paranoia Agent* go beyond individuals’ ability to control them, and end up running rampage across the city. Kon’s is thus a cautionary tale about the dangers of producing monsters that, while figments of the collective imagination, can still wreck material havoc, and cause us to disengage with actuality of everyday experience.

In episode 11, we see Ikari standing on a train. Three students sit behind him complaining about their exams, one of them hopes that Shōnen Batto will come along and ‘smash up the school’. It is a short scene, but there is something telling about this destructive urge, an urge to call upon monsters that will shake the foundations of society and turn everything upside down. This hope for creative destruction can be found in some commentary on the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, which I touched upon in the opening discussion of this article. For example, on March 16, 2011, the philosopher Karatani Kōjin wrote that the disaster held potential for Japan to step outside the framework of capitalist economic development and competition, and that

[i]t is not Japan’s demise that the earthquake has produced, but rather the possibility of its rebirth. It may be that only amid the ruins can people gain the courage to stride down a new path (Karatani/Lippit 2011: n. p.).

I wonder what Kon would have made of this statement. It is clear he would have faith in the capacity of the people affected to face the seemingly overwhelming challenges ahead of them. However, I also think he would be suspicious: both of nihilistic yearning for change through disaster and of what Leheny (2011) has termed Japan’s new ‘disaster nationalism’, which appropriates the *local* suffering of the people of Tōhoku

and presents it as a condition for *national* recovery and integrates the disaster into premade political projects regardless of the wants and needs of the victims (Dudden 2012: 348). For this articulation, and the national discussions that follow, might also be considered delusions that detract from engagement with reality.

Bibliography

- Arai, Andrea. 2000. "'The Wild Child' of 1990s Japan", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 99:4, 841–864. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-99-4-841>.
- Asada, Akira. 1989. "Infantile Capitalism and Japan's Postmodernism: A Fairy Tale", in *Postmodernism and Japan*, edited by Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian. London: Duke University Press, 273–279. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381556-015>.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal* 40:4, 519–531. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.
- Debord, Guy. 2009. *Society of the Spectacle*. Eastborne: Soul Bay Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 2002 [1966]. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Reprint edition with a new preface. Abingdon/New York: Routledge. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203361832>.
- Dudden, Alexis. 2012. "The Ongoing Disaster", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71:2, 345–359. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002191181200006X>.
- Dusinberre, Martin, and Daniel P. Aldrich. 2011. "Hatoko Comes Home: Civil Society and Nuclear Power in Japan", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70:3, 683–705. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911811000866>.
- Figal, Gerald. 1999. *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*. London: Duke University Press. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822396338>.
- . 2012. "Monstrous Media and Delusional Consumption in Kon Satoshi's *Paranoia Agent*", *Mechademia* 5:1, 139–155. Digital object identifier not available: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/400553> [October 31, 2019].
- Fukuzawa, Rebecca. 2007. "The Path to Adulthood According to Japanese Middle Schools", *Journal of Japanese Studies* 20:1, 61–86. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.2307/132784>.
- Harootunian, Harry. 2006. "Japan's Long Postwar: The Trick of Memory and the Ruse of History", in *Japan After Japan*, edited by Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian. London: Duke University Press, 98–121.
- Karatani, Kōjin, and Seiji M. Lippit [transl.]. 2011. "Earthquake and Japan", *Kojin Karatani Official Website*, March 16. Available online: <http://www.kojinkaratani.com/en/article/earthquake-and-japan.html> [June 7, 2018].
- Kon, Satoshi (dir.). 2010 [2004]. *Paranoia Agent*. Anime television series. DVD. Chepstow: MVM Entertainment.
- Leheny, David. 2006. *Think Global, Fear Local: Sex, Violence, and Anxiety in Contemporary Japan*. London: Cornell University Press.
- . 2011. "Hope as the New Normal: National Recovery Through the 3/11 Disaster", *Reischauer Institute Annual Lecture*, Harvard University, October 28. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZfcEf_c7Wk [December 22, 2018].
- Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. 1988. *Beyond Computopia: Information, Automation and Democracy in Japan*. London: Keegan Paul International.
- Murakami, Haruki. 2000. *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2003. *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. London: Vintage Books.
- Napier, Susan. 1993. "Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster From Godzilla to Akira", *Journal of Japanese Studies* 19:2, 327–351. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.2307/132643>.
- . 2006. "'Excuse Me, Who Are You?' Performance, the Gaze and the Female in the Works of Kon Satoshi", in *Cinema Anime*, edited by Steven T. Brown. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 23–42. Digital object identifier: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403983084_2.

- Perkins, Chris. 2012. "Flatness, Depth and Kon Satoshi's Ethics", *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 4:2, 119–133. Digital object identifier: https://doi.org/10.1386/jjkc.4.2.119_1.
- Pulvers, Roger. 2012. "For How Much Longer Will Japan's Fate Remain in the Hands of Amateurs?", *The Japan Times*, January 1. Available online: <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2012/01/01/commentary/for-how-much-longer-will-japans-fate-remain-in-the-hands-of-amateurs/#.UbHu5eCJuIY> [June 7, 2018].
- Reader, Ian. 2000. *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyō*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Shun'ya, Yoshimi, and Shi-Lin Loh [transl.]. 2012. "Radioactive Rain and the American Umbrella", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71:2, 319–331. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911812000046>.
- Smits, Martijntje. 2006. "Taming Monsters: The Cultural Domestication of New Technology", *Technology in Society* 28:4, 489–504. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2006.09.008>.
- Stevens, Carol. 2010. "You Are What You Buy: Postmodern Consumption and Fandom of Popular Culture", *Japanese Studies* 30:2, 199–214. Digital object identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2010.497578>.

Biographical Note

Chris Perkins is Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies at the University of Edinburgh. He has published on topics including Japanese media, radicalism in modern Japan, and border politics.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors of *Nordlit* and the two reviewers for their help and guidance with this article.

